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BULLETIN No. 9

# STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT



## WORKING CONVICTS ON THE PUBLIC ROADS OF ALABAMA

By W. S. KELLER  
State Highway Engineer

JUNE, 1915

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MONTGOMERY, ALA.  
THE BROWN PRINTING CO., STATE PRINTERS AND BINDERS  
1915



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By  
**W. S. KELLER,**  
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**NOTE**

By resolution of the State Highway Commission of Alabama the State Highway Engineer was instructed to have published as Bulletin No. 9 this article on working convicts on the public roads of Alabama.

W. S. KELLER,

*State Highway Engineer.*

## WORKING CONVICTS ON THE PUBLIC ROADS OF ALABAMA

By W. S. KELLER, State Highway Engineer.



GREAT deal has been written and said during the past few years pro and con the working of convicts on the public roads of Alabama. Unfortunately many articles are written by those who have had no experience whatever in the handling of prison labor and their information, to a great extent, is hearsay. A great deal of thought and investigation has been given this subject by the State Highway Department and it would appear that county officials should be given the benefit of such investigations.

There are many pitfalls open to counties first undertaking this problem of convict labor and before organizing a convict road camp, it is very necessary that county commissioners thoroughly study the methods of those who have failed, as well as those who have succeeded. It is useless to argue longer that the use of convicts in the construction of roads is a failure. The proof of the successful and economical handling of county convicts on the roads without shackles and in a most healthful and sanitary way is demonstrated right here in Alabama. A person has only to visit such counties as Dallas, Jefferson, Bullock and Houston to be convinced that this is true. If they can be humanely and successfully used in these counties, they can in all other counties where sufficient number of men are sentenced to hard labor. Failures, without exception, are attributed to one of three causes:

- 1st. Lack of sufficient convicts to offset overhead charges.
- 2nd. Lack of system.
- 3rd. A superabundance of politics.



LULLOCK COUNTY CONVICT CAMP.—PORTABLE HOUSE WHERE CONVICTS SLEEP.

Considering the first cause of failure, insufficient number of convicts: A well equipped grading force should consist of ten teams with necessary tools and machinery. The number of convicts necessary to man an outfit of this size would be:

Drivers .....	10
Dumper .....	1
Loader .....	1
Spreader .....	1
Plow man .....	1
Clearing and grubbing .....	6
Water-boy .....	1
Cook .....	1
Cook's helper .....	1
 Total .....	 23

A good rule is to have not less than one man nor more than one and a half to the mule, and an outfit with less than twenty mules cannot work to the best advantage.

To work this force efficiently will require:

One superintendent.

Two guards.

One extra guard who can be called on when the division of work makes it necessary.

The daily value of this outfit as compared with hired men and teams is as follows:

#### DAILY COST OF HIRED LABOR

Laborers, 23 @ \$1.10.....	\$25.30
Superintendent @ \$3.00.....	3.00
10 teams @ \$4.00.....	40.00
	 \$68.30

#### DAILY COST OF CONVICT LABOR

Feeding and clothing 23 men @ 60c.....\$13.80  
(In some counties the cost of convict maintenance is as low as thirty-two cents per day.)



BULLOCK COUNTY CONVICT CAMP.—CAMP WAGONS FOR SUPERINTENDENT, GUARDS, AND KITCHEN.

Feeding superintendent and guards @ 50c.....	2.00
Wages superintendent @ \$3.00 per day.....	3.00
Wages three guards @ \$1.50.....	4.50
Feeding 20 mules @ 50c.....	10.00
Incidentals .....	2.00
*Court cost .....	6.00
	_____
	\$41.30

This \$41.30 is a fixed cost per day for every day in the month. Twenty-two will be a fair average of the number of working days per month.

\$41.30 multiplied by 30 equals cost per month, or \$1,239.00.

\$1,239.00 divided by 22 equals work day cost, \$56.31.

\$68.30 minus \$56.31 equals \$11.99 saving of convict over hired labor, or \$263.78 for a 22-day working month.

If the number of men is reduced, the effectiveness of the force is proportionately reduced. Practically the same equipment, so far as the camp is concerned, is necessary for eight or ten men as would be for twenty-five, and, in road work, the nature of it necessarily requires a separation of the men into two or three squads, necessitating the employment of several guards. One cook and camp man can serve thirty men as easily as ten. The superintendent and guards' salaries and the fixed expense of the camp is usually termed overhead expenses and decreases proportionately as the number of men increases. Besides the overhead expense of a small convict force, the ineffective work is always apparent.

2nd. Lack of System: More failures in all kinds of business are attributed to lack of system, perhaps, than to any other one cause and this is positively true in working convicts on the public roads. Not to keep a full set of books both to record the receipt and disbursement of goods is negligence deserving the very worst condemna-

\*COURT COST: By this is meant the cost imposed on a prisoner incident to his trial and conviction. If he is unable to pay such cost the county must pay it, and he is required to work out the cost at 75 cents per day. It is difficult to ascertain just what this amounts to, but it is reasonable to suppose that not more than one-third of the convicts are working out cost.



BULLOCK COUNTY CONVICT CAMP.—CAGE HOUSE FOR CONVICTS AND CAMP WAGON FOR GUARDS.

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